

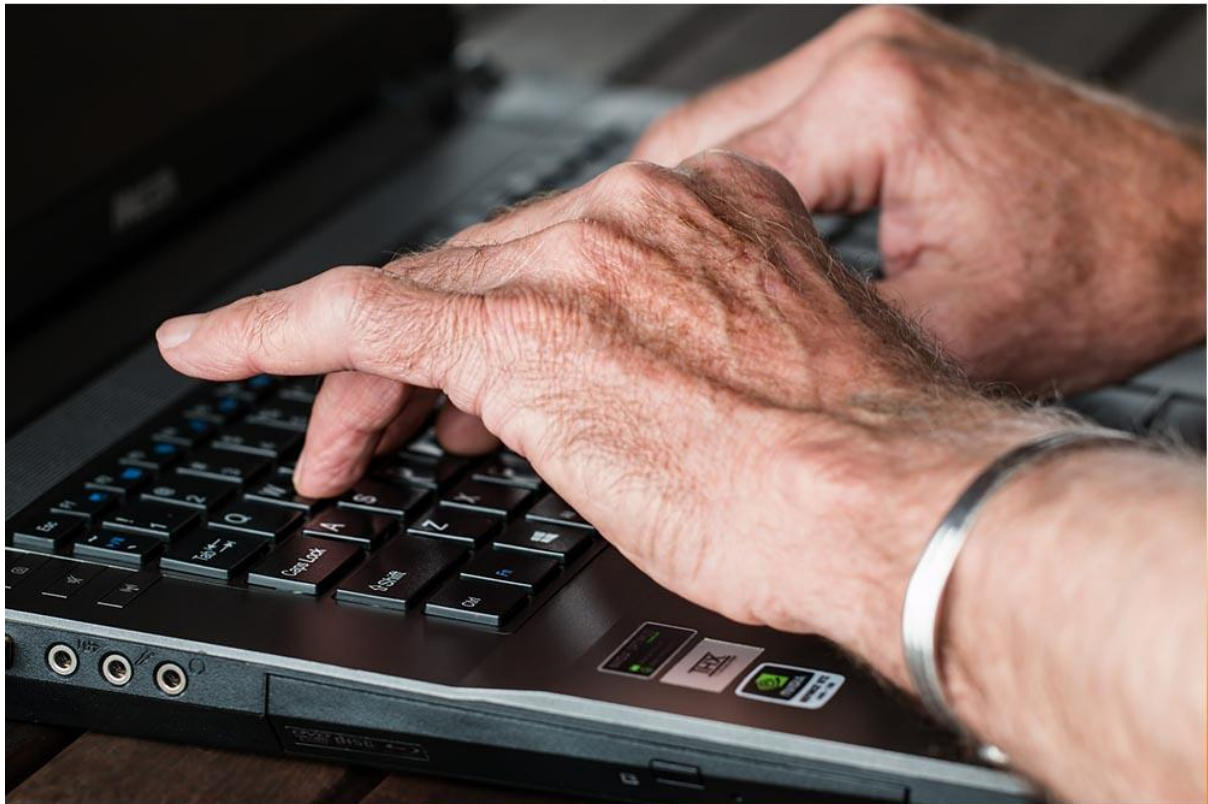
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### The Other and Othering in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Untouchables constitute the bottom layer of the hierarchy of Indian caste system. The menial jobs assigned to them and the way they are treated in society certify their role as the 'other'. Manual Scavenging is a practice still existing in India which creates self othering in outcastes. Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* lays down the stigma associated with manual scavenging by exploring the life of Bakha, an untouchable. This paper analyses *Untouchable* as a seminal work dealing with the othering and oppression meted out to the lowcastes. The hypocrisy of the upper castes and the influences of British rule and Christianity have a role in the process of othering of the untouchable in Indian society. For an outcaste like Bakha, even the hope of equality and freedom from untouchability and poverty is futile. The democratic constitution of India, offering equality of status and opportunities to its citizens fails to eradicate the divisions and discriminations based on caste system. The scientific knowledge and technological inventions have brought changes in labour based divisions in society. But occupations like manual scavenging exist in the central belt of India segregating the population.

Keywords: Caste system, Identity, Other, Othering, Untouchable

Caste system and Indian society are inextricably linked together, so that it becomes difficult for an Indian, especially a Hindu to live without a caste. A caste is assigned to a person even before he is born and remains with him till his death. It becomes his identity. Traditional Indian society was divided into four classes based on the caste system. There were four main castes namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. Each caste had numerous subdivisions, "each with a definite unalterable social status deriving its sanction from religion" (Pruthi 5-6). Different professions were assigned to each caste which they were bound to do. Brahmins were the priestly class. They were the high caste Hindus entrusted with the job of worshipping god and performing sacred rites. Only the people of this caste had the access to Vedas and knowledge. The second caste constituted the Kshatriyas. They were the kings, warriors and soldiers who were endowed the right to rule and the duty to protect the land. Inferior to Brahmins and Kshatriyas were the Vaisyas. Vaisyas were mainly traders who played a remarkable role in making the country prosperous. Sudras belonged to the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy. They were destined to serve the people of other three castes. Peasants, artisans, craftsmen, carpenters, masons, washermen, ploughmen, sweepers etc. came under this caste. These people involved in menial jobs were the untouchables in the society.

Untouchables were denied many rights and were restricted in several ways. They were kept away from the public places and streets. They were prohibited from owning lands, though they were made to work in farms to produce yield for the uppercastes. They were denied access to knowledge as they were not allowed to enter schools. They had to remove the cloth covering their upper body on seeing an uppercaste. They were not supposed to go near an uppercaste and had to maintain a distance from them by making sounds to inform others about their arrival. Mulk Raj Anand in his 1935 work *Untouchable* dwelves deeply into the lives of untouchables and the evil of untouchability they had to confront.

Mulk Raj Anand took great effort to depict the oppression of poor in the traditional Indian society through his works. He always tried to recreate the lives of marginalized and poorer sections, thereby exposing their exploited, impoverished situations. *Untouchable* follows the suit. Bakha, an untouchable of 18 years, who belongs to the sweeper community is the protagonist in Anand's novel. He lived in the outcastes' colony and was in charge of cleaning the public latrines. Bakha, having spent some time serving the British in the Barracks developed a fascination towards everything Western. The behaviour of British soldiers towards him as a human being, unlike the uppercaste Hindus heightened his attachment towards them. By imitating British soldiers in his ways and clothing, Bakha felt superior to his fellow outcastes. As Frantz Fanon puts it in *Black Skin White Masks*, "White men consider themselves superior to black men" and black men try to escape this feeling of inferiority by externally imitating the white men in their ways of life, by putting on the "white mask" (117). Bakha places himself under the service of British by accepting their superiority and dominance and blindly imitates them without being concerned of the aspect of freedom. British find Indians as the 'other', the opposite. They view Indians as subordinates, uncultured and uncivilized. Here, Bakha tries to bridge the difference between himself and the British through this imitation.

What troubled Bakha more than him being different from the British was the dissimilarity between the people of different castes within his country. High caste Hindus treated Bakha and his community as dirt because they clean their dirt. For them Bakha's community represent the 'other'; the poor, doing menial jobs, bound to serve them and moreover, different from the image of 'self' as perceived by these rich uppercaste people. Their attitude towards the untouchables makes them internalise this inferiority and they even accept this otherness. Anand narrates about this internalisation: "Charat Singh's generous promise had called forth the trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his

forefathers, the weakness of the downtrodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog . . . the smile of a slave overjoyed at the condescension of his master"(9).

The novel describes a day in Bakha's life. Through this description, Anand opens up the different ways in which an untouchable is dehumanised. The untouchable community was denied access to the public wells and brooks. The women had to plead the mercy of some uppercaste Hindus to draw water for them. They had no right to attend schools and Bakha therefore had to bribe an uppercaste boy to teach him. They were also forbidden from playing and mingling with uppercaste children. For an outcaste, it was a crime to smoke before people of other castes. Though they were used for cleaning the temple premises, entry inside the temple was denied for them. Bakha was accused of polluting the temple by going inside the temple and Sohini, his sister was accused of defiling the temple priest by touching him. Sohini was molested by the priest, but he cried out the lie that she had polluted him. Being the outcastes, Bakha and Sohini had to remain silent and suffer the insult and inhuman treatment. These marginalised people had to keep to the side of the road and announce their approach to avoid contact with the high caste Hindus. Bakha forgot to call out his arrival once and accidentally touched an uppercaste. That man abused him and gave him a sharp blow on his face while the crowd around them jeered at him. The kind of humiliation he had to suffer made him think of the worse condition of his community. His desire to retaliate was but thwarted by his father who forced him to internalise the inferiority of their caste and to treat the high caste people as their masters. E. M. Forster in his Preface to *Untouchable* corroborates the pathetic condition of a sweeper:

The sweeper is worse than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social

intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul and that he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be.

(vi)

Among the lowcastes themselves, there were degrees of castes. Sweepers were the lowest, while washermen and leatherworkers came above them in hierarchy. The feeling of other and the process of othering exist between all castes. The more the degree of separation, the more it is evident. After being humiliated in several instances, Bakha tries to distance himself from the uppercastes, and even his friends who belonged to the next higher castes. When Ram Charan, the washerman's son offers him sugarplums, Bakha tells him to throw it at him and refuses to touch him. Caste feeling thus plays a crucial role in the othering of the self.

Mulk Raj Anand presents three solutions in his novel to end the marginalisation and discrimination of untouchables. The first solution is Christianity, which is presented to Bakha through the salvationist missionary, Colonel Hutchinson. He tells Bakha to convert his religion to Christianity. Bakha was once told by his father that "all men are kind and it is their religion which prevents them" (74) from mingling with the outcastes. When Hutchinson tells him that Jesus receives all men irrespective of their castes, his interests in Christianity arouse. His fascination ends when Hutchinson calls him a sinner and fails to tell him who Christ is. The second solution offered is the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and his effect on Indian society. Gandhi stood for the untouchables, demanded the opening of public places for them, fasted for their rights, called them Harijans and urged them to keep themselves clean. The

third solution is the separation of caste and profession. By bringing in machines to clean the latrines, manual scavenging can be put to an end.

The solution of embracing Christianity doesn't relieve the untouchable completely from the clutches of untouchability. Though they would be equal before god, their history of untouchability will cling on to them, since that identity remains till their death. The second solution is Gandhiji's principles and support in favour of untouchables. As Anand's character blurts out, Gandhi was an orthodox Hindu, though he spoke for untouchables. Gandhi's opinion that, the government alienate untouchables from Hinduism by providing separate electorates for the depressed classes (Anand 136), is valid because government is making the marginalised the 'other' as though they need special consideration, by allotting reservations to them. Instead of constituting special rights and privileges to such groups, it would be better to take measures to protect their fundamental rights. The third solution of introduction of machines does have a role in separation of professions from caste. Not just for the scavengers, but the introduction of machines have brought changes in the lives of untouchables as a whole. They were let free from the caste based professions and could choose the profession they liked. In today's society, it is difficult to identify one's caste from his/her profession. But those who perform menial jobs, whichever caste he/ she belong to may be treated as the other. Even with the technological inventions and its use, people in some parts of India are still engaged in manual scavenging and other lowly jobs. The rejection of Swachh Bharath Project by UN recently for lack of "a clear and holistic human rights based approach" exemplifies the same. UN advised the nation "to safeguard the fundamental rights of specific caste affected groups engaged in manual scavenging or those who are marginalised such as ethnic minorities and people living in remote rural areas" (Press Trust of India). Anand's *Untouchable* ends with a note of optimism as Bakha hopes to find himself as part of the society and not as 'an other' by escaping from the stigma of

untouchability with the help of flush system. Along with the technological inventions, Government should focus on the protection of fundamental rights of the marginalised in order to prevent their 'othering'.

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